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SUBJECT: RUSSIAN REACTION TO TORGAU '06 POSTPONEMENT

REF: A. MOSCOW 9821
[1](#)B. MOSCOW 9915
[1](#)C. MOSCOW 7384
[1](#)D. SECDEF 291710Z AUG 06 (NOTAL)

Classified By: Minister-Counselor for Political Affairs Alice G. Wells.
Reasons: 1.4(B/D).

[1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY: In response to U.S. insistence on extending Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) protection to personnel participating in this year's Torgau '06 bilateral military exercise, the GOR seized the initiative to postpone, but not cancel, the event and left the door open for continued bilateral military cooperation. Subsequent Russian reaction has been relatively muted. Both Foreign and Defense Ministry officials promised to seek State Duma ratification of the long-awaited NATO SOFA, although timing remains uncertain. While some commentators cast the postponement as an example of worsening U.S.-Russia relations, others attributed the decision to the GOR's desire to avoid public protests against the deployment of U.S. forces and noted a similar GOR decision to postpone NATO exercises. Political considerations likely made postponement an easy decision for the GOR. END SUMMARY.

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SOFA PROTECTION PRECIPITATES POSTPONEMENT

[1](#)2. (C) Faced with U.S. insistence that the GOR provide SOFA protection to U.S. personnel participating in this year's exercise (Refs C, D), the GOR pre-emptively postponed, rather than canceled, the event and promised to seek State Duma ratification of the NATO SOFA signed by FM Sergey Lavrov last year. The overall tone of discussions with GOR officials has been business-like, reinforcing the view that Moscow wants to keep the door open to further military cooperation. Indeed, a DoD delegation is currently in Moscow to discuss with Russian counterparts the details of a bilateral workplan.

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MEDIA FOCUS MUTED

[1](#)3. (SBU) Media coverage of the postponement of Torgau '06 has also been relatively balanced. Most reports focused on the stated reason for the postponement -- the absence of SOFA protection for U.S. forces -- but some tried to portray the decision more generally as an example of worsening U.S.-Russia relations. Several commentaries, including one on state-run television, suggested that the decision stemmed from the GOR's desire to avoid public protests against the presence of U.S. forces, especially in the month prior to local and regional elections in various parts of the country. Gennadiy Zyuganov, leader of the Communist Party (KPRF), was

shown on TV calling for action against what he termed the U.S. aim to establish a "bridgehead" in one of Russia's key regions.

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PRIVATE COMMENTARY MORE POLITICAL

14. (C) Several contacts told us they were not surprised by the decision to postpone the exercise. Aleksandr Golts, a respected defense analyst who often supports positions contrary to official views, told us that senior Kremlin officials had become increasingly concerned about KPRF threats to mobilize protests against the exercise. In his view, some Kremlin officials were probably pleased to see the U.S. withdraw from a NATO exercise in Ukraine in May. However, they did not want to concede political points in Russia to the communists in the month prior to local and regional elections -- nor did they want government authorities to be seen as preventing or breaking up a demonstration that, in all likelihood, would have found substantial support among Russia's anti-U.S., anti-NATO public. Politically, this would have been a lose-lose situation for the Kremlin and its supporters.

15. (C) Golts went on to say that the Kremlin had made the decision. He emphasized that the Kremlin wanted to make a point about the general cooling of bilateral ties with the U.S. He pointed to several irritants, such as lack of resolution of WTO negotiations and Senator Richard Lugar's statement the previous week suggesting an adversarial relationship with Russia, as motivating the Kremlin decision. In any case, Golts said there were many in the Defense Ministry who welcomed the decision to postpone, particularly

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those who continued to view bilateral military ties with the U.S. through a zero-sum prism. In this context, Golts noted that only radical military reform within Russia's defense establishment would lead to real change in Soviet-era attitudes that in turn might permit deeper military cooperation with the U.S.

16. (C) Aleksandr Belkin of the Council on Foreign and Defense Policy discounted the KPRF angle, explaining that the Kremlin viewed Zyuganov and the communists as incapable of generating substantial public support against the exercise. Nonetheless, he conceded that the Kremlin did not want to take any chances prior to local elections next month. Belkin echoed Golts' view that the Kremlin had made the decision, partly to signal its displeasure with Washington and the general cooling of bilateral relations. In Belkin's opinion, the exercise was an easy target.

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NATO EXERCISE ALSO POSTPONED

17. (C) Isabelle Francois of the NATO Information Office said she was not surprised by the decision to postpone the exercise. She noted that the Defense Ministry had postponed a scheduled NATO exercise in Pskov several weeks previously. Although the reason given pertained to "timing," Francois suspected that Russian authorities were nervous about the prospect of foreign military forces operating in Russia at a time when public support for closer ties to the Alliance had recently fallen.

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COMMENT

18. (C) The muted tone of the GOR's announcement of the postponement of the Torgau exercise indicates a desire not to let bilateral tensions torpedo the overall mil-mil relationship. Political considerations made a postponement

convenient, as the Kremlin avoids the need to explain the presence of foreign military forces just prior to regional elections. How quickly the Kremlin moves -- or does not move -- in securing Duma ratification of the NATO SOFA will be a telling barometer of whether the GOR wants to take some political risks to advance the mil-mil relationship. The outcome of this week's bilateral military discussions should also be insightful in this regard. We will seek to measure with contacts in the Duma and elsewhere in the coming weeks the prospects for SOFA ratification.

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